

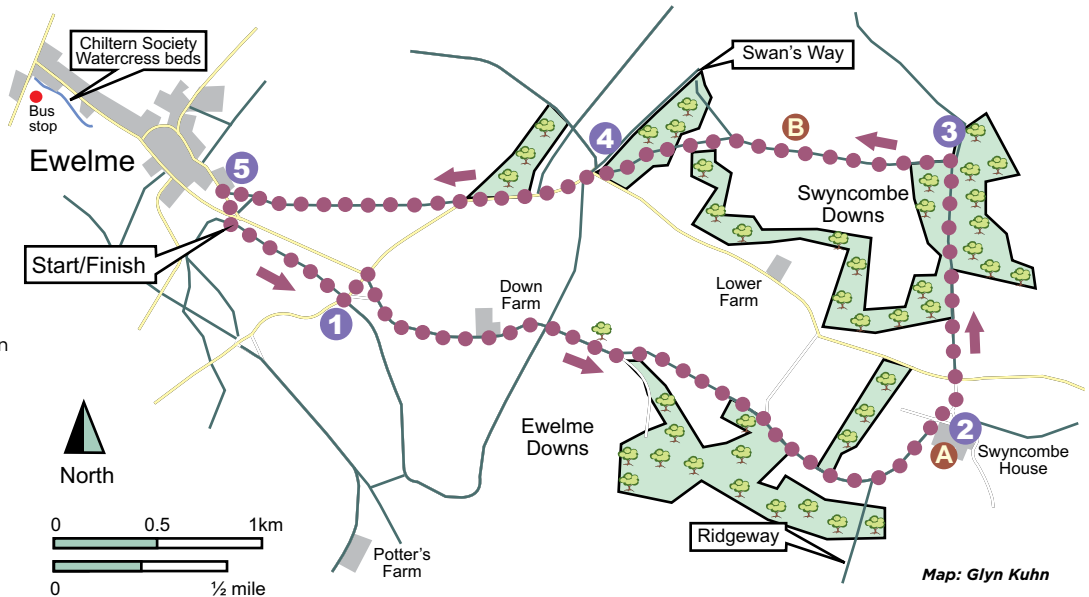
Swyncombe snowdrop walk

With **Andrew Clark**

The highlight of this walk is the wonderful display of snowdrops and aconites at St Botolph's Church in Swyncombe. Walkers also have a chance to discover the distinguished history of Ewelme, visit its watercress beds, and take in the exhilarating views over Oxfordshire from an old hill fort on Swyncombe Downs.

- START:** Ewelme Recreation Ground car park, OX10 6PG. Grid ref: SU 648 912
- DISTANCE:** 5.5 miles, with c130m of ascent
- TERRAIN:** An easy walk with one steep climb and one steep descent
- MAPS:** OS Explorer 171 and Chiltern Society 10

- REFRESHMENTS:** None on route except at Swyncombe Church on a Sunday, when the snowdrops are out. In Ewelme there is the Shepherd's Hut pub, tel: 01491 836636. The Village Store in Parson's Lane has a tearoom
- PUBLIC TRANSPORT:** No direct bus service to the village, but bus 132/139 between Henley-on-Thames and Benson stops nearby in Green Lane



Route

Go through the gate at the back of the car park and follow the path to the right of the hedgerow. At the top of the rise, bear half right across the field to go through a gate in the middle of the hedgerow ahead.

1. Turn left along the lane and, just before a road junction, turn right along a bridleway towards Ewelme Down Farm. Follow the bridleway for over a kilometre then bear left c50m before the entrance to Ewelme Down House. Go through a small wood into a field, continue straight ahead to the right of a hedgerow and then through the next wood to meet a wide track. Turn right and follow the track all the way to St Botolph's Church, Swyncombe.
2. From the church gate, turn right and then bear left along a lane to a road junction. Go straight across, through a gate and follow the signs

for both the Chiltern Way and Ridgeway. Climb the steep hill ahead all the way to the top, ignoring all paths and tracks to the left and right.

3. About 150m from the top, the Chiltern Way turns left and the Ridgeway continues downhill. Turn left on the Chiltern Way and after c500m go through a gate on the left into the remains of a hill fort. Stay on the ridge and go through a gate to exit the ancient site. Follow the path steeply down through a wood to a tarmac lane on the left at the bottom.
4. Taking great care, turn right along the lane for c600m. Where it bends to the left, bear right through a gate to rejoin the Chiltern Way. Bear left uphill to the right of a fence. Stay straight ahead on this path for just under a kilometre.
5. Cross a farm access road and continue in the same direction to drop down to a lane. Turn left along the lane to return to the car park.

Points of Interest

Some say that in Anglo-Saxon times Ewelme was known *Aewhylme*, because of the 'water whelming' up from the ground. In the Domesday Book it was called La Welme. It has a long and distinguished history, and has connections to Geoffrey Chaucer, Henry VIII and Jerome K Jerome, author of *Three Men in a Boat*. The highlights of a visit to the village are the 15th century cloistered almshouses, St Mary the Virgin Church and the watercress beds, which are owned and managed by the Chiltern Society as a local nature reserve. The old manor house was converted into Ewelme Palace by the Duke and Duchess of Suffolk. By Tudor times it belonged to the crown, and in 1540 Henry VIII held a Privy Council there. At the far end of the village is the King's Pool where Henry used to bathe. The Duchess, Alice de la Pole, was the granddaughter of poet Geoffrey Chaucer. In 1437 she and her husband were responsible for rebuilding the church, and the construction of the cloistered almshouses and the school. The latter is believed to be the oldest building in Britain still in use as a local authority school. Jerome K Jerome is buried in St Mary's churchyard. Further information on the opening times of the watercress beds can be found in Member offers on p 38. Some areas of the nature reserve are public and therefore open all year round, free of charge.

- A Swyncombe:** The name comes from the Old English words *Swin* for wild boar and *Cumb* or *Combe* for valley or hollow. Swyncombe House was first established in the 13th century, but by the mid 16th century it was said to be in ruins. It was then rebuilt, but burned down in 1814. The current building dates from 1840.
- A St Botolph's Church:** Every February the churchyard has a wonderful display of snowdrops and aconites. At this time visitors on a Sunday can usually enjoy home-made tea and cakes and can also buy preserves and pickles. The church itself is named after the patron saint of travellers. It is of flint construction and was completed in 1020. It belonged to Bec Abbey in Normandy and was probably the poorest of the local parishes. Notable features are the oldest double aumbry (a cabinet for chalices) in England that is still in use, the 14th century bell, the 17th and 18th century stained glass, and the restored medieval wall paintings.
- B Swyncombe Downs:** This is a designated Site of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI). It's well known for its grassland specialities including bastard toadflax, wild candytuft, crested hairgrass, small scabious, creeping toadflax, valerian, felwort and pyramidal orchid. The ancient earthwork is known as the Danish Intrenchment and dates back to c870. It was built by the Danes during their battles with Alfred the Great.